

Invisible Cities, by Italo Calvino (*trans.* William Weaver) (London: Vintage, 1974)
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Invisible Cities is presented as a conversation between effervescent narrators. Marco Polo, Venetian explorer and *de facto* ethnographer of Western, Central, and East Asian cities and Kublai Khan, emperor of the Mongolian Empire and grandson of Genghis Khan. The two sit in silent contemplation, or conversation, or over a game of chess, or watching the Khan's capital city, Kai-ping-fu, twist and writhe beneath them. Calvino uses this conversation to present Polo's work to the reader.

When one opens Calvino's 1972 masterpiece and begins to read, one may think, "This fool has put his best writing right up front. There's no way he can keep up this quality forever!" But, reader, he *does*. Some readers may understand *Invisible Cities* as a novel or a work of literary merit, but that is not all that it is. It is helpful to read *Invisible Cities* as an instruction manual for how anthropologists can convey the truth of their object of study. Some things cannot be counted. If our discipline—as anthropologists and ethnographers—asks us to convey human creations however we are able, Marco Polo shows us that sometimes, in order to describe the truth of a city, one must use qualitative narrative and engaging storytelling, regardless of a subject's empirical realities.

Polo is a colonizer and therefore his reports are irreparably tainted. But one must remember that Kublai Khan is *also* a colonizer, and that neither has the legitimate authority to speak on the subjects at hand. One must understand the conversation between Polo and the

Khan as imperfect, and one must also find the blind spots—what *doesn't* Polo say, and what *doesn't* the Khan ask? What does Polo leave out in pursuit of his beautiful, laconic style? Power always plays. The stories Polo, a merchant from the vastly wealthy city-state of Venice reporting to Kublai Khan, the wealthiest emperor of the world's largest empire, on the cities within that empire that he had opportunity to visit because of his merchant routes deserve at least a little skepticism.

Marco Polo describes the cities he has visited in short vignettes. Uniquely, he describes cities in purely qualitative terms. He possesses a rare ability to distill the essential understanding of a city and to communicate its profound truth to the Khan. Anthropology in Marco Polo's style would be impossible in contemporary U.S. cities. Martin Heavy Head wrote of his time in the so-called U.S., saying, "culture is gentrified. There is no local flavour any more. It's all McDonalds, Chilis [*sic*], & WalMart in every town. One big strip mall. Driving through is like a Flintstones backdrop. Every town looks the same. Same music on the radio. Same food. Same ugly, everywhere."¹ What Heavy Head calls *local flavour* is what an anthropologist might call *qualitative analysis*. It's what a longtime resident of a city might call *spirit* or *ghost*, depending on whether they still believe in the city and its promises and threats.

Polo's ability to capture the essence of a city is laudable, but it is his prose in his reports to the Khan that is the true mark of the participant anthropologist. "The foreigner had learned

¹ <https://twitter.com/mheavyhead/status/882435692747399168>

to speak the emperor's language or the emperor to understand the language of the foreigner."² In order to communicate a city to an audience, one cannot rely on quantitative measurements alone. Polo acknowledges the usefulness of quantizing but only in the sense that a "city does not consist of [the numbers and angles of its construction], but of relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past: the height of a lamppost and the distance from the ground of a hanged usurper's swaying feet."³ In describing cities, Polo endeavors to convey how to understand a city. He forces us to ask ourselves, "What are the true stakes of anthropology? What is there to be gained or lost in the communication?" As Polo says, "It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear."⁴

Polo knows that his audience is not made up of scholars. This does not mean that he does not demand excellence from his readers, however. Polo has a particularly difficult mission. He is a double anthropologist—first, he is the Khan's "informant"⁵ and the Khan is the ethnographer. His reports of the many cities in the Khan's vast empire allow the Khan to study the urban and human-caused natures of the land under his jurisdiction.

Polo's second mission is as an anthropologist himself. In this, Polo makes no mention of his own informants, which adds to the anti-quantitative nature of his reports. One is left to

² Calvino, *Invisible Cities*.

³ Cities & Memory 3: Zaira

⁴ *Invisible Cities*

⁵ Kublai Khan's word, not mine.

wonder what the qualitative truth and the quantitative reality of these cities have to do with one another. But this is a question we must ask of all anthropologists, not just Marco Polo.

Cities evolve. They change and swallow one another. Sometimes this is a slow process, where the spirit of a city will become the ghost of a city, but only to old residents whose memories are not poisoned with nostalgia (to those nostalgic minds, all cities are ghosts and only live in the past). Sometimes there is a clear break between the old city and the new, and sometimes the old city obstinately remains, venerated and tumorous, surrounded and occupied by the New City. Consider the thought experiment presented by Heraclitus and Plato, called the *Ship of Theseus*. As the experiment goes, roughly, Theseus has a ship which, over the course of a century, is replaced plank-by-plank until after some time all of the planks have been replaced. Then, somehow, all of the planks from Theseus's original ship are reassembled. The first question is whether the new ship is still the same object as the original ship. The second question is, once the original pieces are assembled, which if either of the ships is the original one? There have been several suggestions on how to resolve these questions, but Polo's is unique. His answer could only apply to cities, though, and potentially only to Maurilia: "Sometimes different cities follow one another on the same site and under the same name, born and dying without knowing one another, without communication among themselves. At times even the name of the inhabitants remains the same, and their voices' accent, and also the features of the faces; but the gods who live beneath names and above places have gone off without a

word and outsiders have settled in their place.”⁶

What is remarkable about Polo’s reports is not their quantitative accuracy, nor their ability to truthfully represent the many ethnic groups and practices of people who live together within the Khan’s empire. Rather, Polo’s genius is in his storytelling. It is the application of this genius that allows us to witness the utter brilliance of the cities that make up the Khan’s empire. What, again, are the stakes of a purely qualitative anthropology? This kind of anthropology is guided by an intentional and total renunciation of the idea that from the numbers of a place one can extrapolate the truth of a place. Polo reminds us that there is no such thing as a *city*. A city contains no inherent meaning. Without adherence to an idea, a truth that one can only convey through qualitative storytelling, a city becomes a mere collection of people in an odd shape. Contemporary scholars who wish to follow in Ruth Behar’s footsteps of becoming participant anthropologists or compassionate ethnographers would do well to follow Marco Polo’s lead and not merely acknowledge their selves in their work, but to fully become the work.⁷

Polo, or perhaps Calvino, separates the cities into various categories. Those categories are Memory, Desire, Signs, Eyes, Names, the Dead, the Sky, thin cities, trading cities, continuous cities, and hidden cities. Each city Polo describes fits loosely into one of these categories, but the categories are more about the cities relating to one another than how each city relates

⁶ Cities & Memory 5: Maurilia

⁷ Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer*.

to the name of the category. This kind of meta storytelling is vital to organize such a large number of cities. In our discipline, the organization of the story is part of the report, and it must reflect the theme and structure of the subjects it is describing.

For example, the fourth City in the Sky, Perinthia, is terrifying. It was designed according not to the plans of architects but to those of astronomers, who attempted to mirror the designs of the sky and the constellations in order to create a perfect city that perfectly mirrored the design of heaven. “Following the astronomers’ calculations precisely, Perinthia was constructed; various peoples came to populate it; the first generation born in Perinthia began to grow within its walls; and these citizens reached the age to marry and have children.

“In Perinthia’s streets and squares today you encounter cripples, dwarfs, hunchbacks, obese men, bearded women. But the worst cannot be seen; guttural howls are heard from cellars and lofts, where families hide children with three heads or with six legs.

“Perinthia’s astronomers are faced with a difficult choice. Either they must admit that all their calculations were wrong and their figures are unable to describe the heavens, or else they must reveal that the order of the gods is reflected exactly in the city of monsters.”⁸

One asks, “did Polo describe the entire city in this report?” Yes and no. Cities are unknowable. One cannot hope to ever perfectly understand the nature of a city. On the other hand, one can ask whether this is *a* description of a city which captures a truth. In the second

⁸ Cities & the Sky 2: Perinthia

case, one can agree that Polo has achieved his goal. If the city of Perinthia leaves a desolate haunting echo in the hearts of its visitors, that echo also exists in the heart of the Khan who hears Polo's report. The report is not the "truth" of the city, as so many anthropologists would expect. Instead, it is the haunting sensation that sits in one's memory, knowing that no matter where one goes, the City of Perinthia still existed. This is how to read *Invisible Cities*, and this, Calvino suggests, is how to convey anthropological reports.

Sometimes this conveyed sense of a city is not an echo. Sometimes it is a splatter of brilliant glitter, which remains in hidden crevices and spots, turning up no matter how often one cleans. Little remnants of the past that travels and jumps from the skin into cloth, drains, and floors. It is never truly gone, and one can never be sure a new speck will not turn up in a deep fold of a jacket or under the fingernail of a lover. In the city of Thekla builders are always building. They build "So that its destruction cannot begin."⁹ What great plan could fit the scale of an ever-rising, ever-expanding city? "Work stops at sunset. Darkness falls over the building site. The sky is filled with stars. 'There is the blueprint,' they say."¹⁰ But not all cities are based on what is above or below. Some cities are more than metropolis-necropolis or metropolis-uranopolis.

There is no way Polo could have visited all of these cities in one lifetime, and yet to read his conversation is to believe him. The only explanation, therefore, is that time in *Invisible*

⁹ Cities & the Sky 3: Thekla

¹⁰ *Id.*

Cities is wibbly wobbly. The mundane city of Trade is recognizable to contemporary readers.¹¹

We have all been to Trade. Even though Polo and Kublai Khan's conversation presumably takes place in the mid-13th Century, Trade is made up of airports. Rather, it is made up of one country whose only borders are airports. You can leave Trade, fly across the world and arrive in Trade. But when you leave the airport, you are somewhere else. Penthesilea is another city that goes on forever, but it is a city exclusively made up of the unnavigable outskirts of the absent city of Penthesilea.¹²

Polo is much like the cities he describes. He is everywhere and everywhen. The Khan is his travel companion through time and in and out of stories. May all of us anthropologists bring our readers with us, not like Dante and Virgil but rather as Marco Polo and the Golden Khan.

¹¹ Continuous Cities 2: Trade

¹² Continuous Cities 4: Penthesilea